

NOTE: The President spoke at 10 a.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. A tape was not available for verification of the content of these remarks.

Telephone Remarks to the National Emergency Management Association Meeting

February 26, 1996

The President. Hello.

FEMA Director James Lee Witt. Mr. President, good morning.

The President. Good morning, James Lee, how are you?

Mr. Witt. I'm fine, sir. We have a lot of State directors in the room, probably about 200 people here and we're very appreciative for you to call in.

The President. Well, I'm delighted to do it, and I wish I were there with you.

Mr. Witt. We do, too. [*Laughter*]

The President. You haven't seen Washington today—it just depends—I wish I were there with you even more than you wish I were there. [*Laughter*]

Let me begin by saying that I can imagine that for many of you, having the chance to come to the conference is a welcome relief from being out there on the front lines of disasters in your home States. This has been a tough, a cold, a wet, even a miserable winter for people in a lot of places and many of you are still in response or early recovery from the floods and the blizzards. We also, as I'm sure you know, have these terrible fires in some parts of our country. We've had more than 3 times as many disasters declared in the first 6 weeks of this year than in this same period in the past 20 years.

I was recently in Oregon, Idaho, Washington, and Pennsylvania to see the devastation, the ruined homes, the businesses, as a result of the recent flooding. And I got a chance to talk with people who have lost their homes and their belongings and literally have to start all over again. I couldn't have known it when I became President, but I suppose that I've seen the widest array of natural disasters, along with James Lee Witt, in the last 3 years as in any period—comparable period—in modern history. We had the great Midwest flood of '93, the Northridge earth-

quake, the Oklahoma City bombing, Hurricanes Opal and Marilyn, dozens of floods and tornadoes, and of course, these fires.

I did know, though, when I became President that this was an important part of my job. When I became President I promised myself, based on my own experience as a Governor and my own frustrations with FEMA, that I would improve the Nation's response to disasters. For many years FEMA had been regarded almost universally as an agency not up to the job, and I'm very proud that under James Lee Witt's management and with all of your help, FEMA is now a model disaster relief agency, and in some corners, thought to be by far the most successful part of the Federal Government today. That is a breathtaking turnaround in just 3 years.

If I could just give one example: It used to take a month or more for many people to begin receiving relief, and now people can call in to a 1-800 number and see those checks arrive within days.

I am very pleased with the progress that's been made. I also am more impressed than ever before about the importance, the integral importance of FEMA to the Nation's business. It now relates to the Transportation Department, the Department of Health and Human Services, the Labor Department, the Energy Department, right across the line because of all of us having to work with James Lee in the dealing with disasters. So today it's a pleasure for me to announce to all of you that I am extending Cabinet membership for the first time in history to FEMA and to James Lee Witt.

Mr. Witt. Thank you, sir.

The President. Let me also say that I think all of us know that in dealing with these disasters, the most important thing is the spirit of the people. I'll never forget when James Lee and I were in Woodland, Washington, a few days ago. We came upon a 70-year-old man, and he and his wife had lost everything in the flood. He had even lost his hearing aid. And he looked at me and he said, "Well, I'm 70 years old and I've never had a President shake hands with me before. It was nearly worth losing my home to do that at my age." [*Laughter*]

And I thought to myself I wished that spirit could kind of somehow capture America. And at the end of my visit with this man he said to me how grateful he was for the help he'd received, how grateful he was for everyone treating him as they had. And then he said, "It's just too bad that we don't behave this way toward each other all the time." And I think that's an important lesson that we could take out of the work that FEMA and all of you have done. The teamwork, the spirit of can-do, the openness to doing what has to be done, the total lack of cynicism that you see in the midst of a disaster and taking care of its aftermath, that's really what this country needs all day, every day. When America works together we never lose; and if we don't, we beat ourselves.

So I want to say again to all of you how grateful I am to you. I know the American people look to you, your Governors, to James Lee, and to me when they need us in these disasters. I know that they rise to the challenges they rarely do on a daily basis when a disaster occurs. And I just want to tell you how grateful I am to you for your public service and how I want to encourage you to continue to imbue the spirit of service that you demonstrate in times of disasters every day, every week, all year long.

Congratulations for all the good work you do. Have a successful conference, and let's hope and pray that for the rest of this year you won't have quite so much to do as you have had in the beginning.

Thank you, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:24 a.m. from the Oval Office at the White House.

Remarks Announcing Sanctions Against Cuba Following the Downing of Brothers to the Rescue Airplanes

February 26, 1996

Good afternoon. Two days ago, in broad daylight and without justification, Cuban military aircraft shot down two civilian planes in international airspace. Search and rescue efforts by the Coast Guard, which began immediately after we received word of the inci-

dent, have failed to find any of the four individuals who were aboard the airplanes.

These small airplanes were unarmed and clearly so. Cuban authorities knew that. The planes posed no credible threat to Cuba's security. Although the group that operated the planes had entered Cuban airspace in the past on other flights, this is no excuse for the attack, and provides—let me emphasize—no legal basis under international law for the attack. We must be clear: This shooting of civilian aircraft out of the air was a flagrant violation of international law. It is wrong, and the United States will not tolerate it.

Saturday's attack is further evidence that Havana has become more desperate in its efforts to deny freedom to the people of Cuba. Also on Saturday the Cuban Council, a broad group that wants to bring democracy to Cuba, had planned a day of peaceful discussion and debate. Instead, in the days leading up to this gathering, scores of activists were arrested and detained. Two have already been sentenced to long prison terms. They join about 1,000 others in Cuba who are in jail solely because of their desire for freedom. Now the downing of these planes demands a firm response from both the United States and the international community. I am pleased that the European Union today strongly condemned the action.

Last night, on my instructions, Ambassador Albright convened an emergency session of the United Nations Security Council to condemn the Cuban action and to present the case for sanctions on Cuba until it agrees to abide by its obligation to respect civilian aircraft and until it compensates the families of the victims.

Today, I am also ordering the following unilateral actions. First, I am asking that Congress pass legislation that will provide immediate compensation to the families, something to which they are entitled under international law, out of Cuba's blocked assets here in the United States. If Congress passes this legislation, we can provide the compensation immediately.

Second, I will move promptly to reach agreement with the Congress on the pending Helms-Burton Cuba legislation so that it will enhance the effectiveness of the embargo in